Thinking as Medicine

September 18, 2012

Meditation is like medicine for the mind. And as with physical medicines, some of the things you do in meditation are good for particular instances, particular problems, and not good for other problems. And there are some things that are good across the board. There are some medicines that are supposed to be good for everybody. And others that could be poisonous for one person might be helpful for somebody else. Or that are poisonous for one particular illness would actually help cure another one. In terms of meditation, mindfulness is always good. The ability to keep in mind what you’re doing, the ability to keep in mind what you’ve done in the past that’s worked and hasn’t worked—that’s something the Buddha says is useful everywhere. And then there are other qualities that you have to really know what they’re good for, when they’re good, and when you have to put them aside. Like your thinking in the meditation, directed thought and evaluation, you need these in order to evaluate how things are going with your meditation. But you can’t sit here evaluating things all the time, thinking about things all the time, because sometimes the thinking goes away from where it should be, pulls you out of the present moment, or it simply gets in the way of settling down further. It may help you get down to a certain stage of the practice, but then it gets in the way of settling down to deeper stages of the practice. So you have to have a sense of when the thinking is useful and when it’s not. For instance, if you simply have trouble settling down with the breath, the mind is not going to settle down. You have to think about other things—things that will make you more willing to settle down. You’ve got plans for tomorrow or plans for the next day. One useful thought, of course, is that you may not live to see tomorrow or the next day. Something could happen very easily tonight, and all those plans would be for naught. In the meantime, you’ve wasted a really good opportunity to get the mind ready to go. If you’re feeling angry at somebody, you can ask yourself what good is done by the anger. If you’re wishing for them to suffer, what good does that cause? What good does that bring about? A lot of people, when they suffer, instead of seeing the error of their ways and becoming better people, actually get worse. So you develop thoughts of goodwill, first for yourself, then for the other person. If goodwill is hard, then remind yourself that you’re sitting here angry, eaten up with the fire of anger. If that approach is not effective, the person could know that you’re angry with them. The person would probably be pleased. You’re ruining your meditation over them. Do you want to please that person? It’s not the kindest thought, but it’s an effective one. When you’re engaging in thoughts like this, you should try to develop a sensitivity to where exactly the real problem is and how you can give it a karate chop. Because you don’t want to spend the whole meditation thinking thoughts of this nature. You want to think just enough so you can get the mind back in the mood to settle down with the breath. This, of course, is a skill. It takes time. But after a while, you begin to realize where your sensitive points are. You go straight for those. If you’re feeling depressed, feeling discouraged in the practice, the common treatment is to think about the good things you’ve done in the past, the times you’ve been generous, the times you’ve been virtuous when you didn’t have to be. You could have gotten away with something, but you chose the honorable course. Think about that. That’s one use of thinking. Get the mind in shape to settle down. And if you want to cut them down, there’s no problem because there are no other trees around them. Other trees, though, are in a forest and their branches are entangled with the branches of other trees. So before you can cut them down, you’ve got to trim the branches and be very careful about which direction you cut it so it actually comes down to the ground and doesn’t start leaning on another tree. So any thought that gives you a sense of encouragement when you need encouragement, a sense of saṃvega about the issues out in the world when the issues in the world are getting you entangled—those are thoughts you want to develop. And then you come to the breath. In the beginning, you’ve got to evaluate the breath. How is the breathing going? Which kind of breathing is it? What kind of breathing do you want to settle in with right now? Is the mind ready to go to subtle breathing right away or does it have to deal with the grosser aspects of the in-and-out breath first? Especially if you’ve been meditating all day, you may find that it’s very easy to go quickly straight to the subtle breath. That’s fine. In fact, sometimes that helps you figure out what the most comfortable in-and-out breathing is if you have a very broad sense of the body and a clear sense of how the different breath energies are moving in the body. If it’s not all that clear, at least you get a sense that when you’re aware of the body as much as you can be in the largest frame of reference you can manage, what kind of breathing feels good. And you may want to experiment a little bit with it. Tweak it here, tweak it there. Notice if you’re squeezing the breath out at the end of the out-breath, pumping it in at the end of the in-breath, or if you’re trying to pinch off the ends of the breath so you can see clearly, “Now is the in-breath, now is the out-breath.” That’s an unfortunate habit most of us have. We try to make a little pinch in the energy to be very clear that now the out-breath has stopped and now the in-breath is going to start. That’s one thing that cuts off the possibility of getting into a nice state of rapture. So when you breathe out, you don’t have to pinch the end. When you start breathing in, let it happen on its own. These are some of the things you can notice. And when things seem well, then you might try to settle down. This is a question that’s often asked, “How much direct thought and evaluation is necessary?” The answer is, “Well, how much do you need in order to have a sense of ease in the body?” You can think of the dog lying down. It lies down on the ground and whoops, there’s a rock. So it gets up and it scratches the rock away. Then it lies down again and tries it again. It does this several times until things are good enough. And how do you know it’s good enough? Well, you just try staying there for a while. Some days you’re going to be like a dog or willing to lie down on the ground. Other days, the mind is more like a princess who can’t sleep on a mattress with a pea under the mattress. But ask yourself, “Do you have to be that sensitive in order to settle down? Do things have to be that perfect in order for you to settle down?” Then try to focus in on one spot and be at that spot, inhabit that spot. We’ve spoken before of the image of a lens. Instead of having the focal point outside of the lens, think of the focal point in the lens, right here in the middle of your awareness, wherever it seems to be centered. Then put your energy into maintaining that focus, that sense of oneness. As for the breath, let it do its own thing. You don’t have to control it. You can be breathed by the breath. And see how it goes. If things begin to lose focus, notice that and ask yourself, “Okay, what’s happening? Why are you blurring out?” So you settle in, and as long as things are going well, you don’t have to think too much about it. It’s only when things are not going well that you pull out a little bit. Try to analyze it. And keep your analysis focused on what’s happening in the present moment. If you find it gets carried off into larger thoughts about dharma books you’ve read, or analysis of you as a person—whether you’re a good meditator or a bad meditator—those are not things you want. And if you start tracing back, then this thought that’s bothering you, or whatever is bothering you, where does it come from? You start thinking about your childhood. That usually is not a useful train of thought. The issue is that right now you’re using that strategy. Right now you’re going for that particular thought. What pleasure are you getting out of it now? What pleasure do you expect to get out of it now? Pose that question in the mind. And if the mind refuses to answer, say, “Okay, if you don’t want to answer, I’m not going to cooperate.” And you go back to the breath. You try to keep your thinking as focused as much as possible on issues in the present moment, and getting back as quickly as possible. Again, you want to be as efficient as you can in this. It’s going to take a while to develop this kind of efficiency. But this is one of the reasons why the Jhans and Thalin are so quick at retorts, because they had to learn how to be quick in retorting to their own mind. And you read Awareness itself, and you see the kind of thinking that Ajahn Fuen used with his students. Well, it was because he used that thinking with his own mind. Try to go straight for the jugular and then back to the breath. In my own experience, the only time I found it useful to try to trace things back is when there’s a line of thinking that says, “You shouldn’t be meditating, you should be doing something else.” You can ask yourself, “Well, where did you pick that one up? Who would have said that? Why would you have picked it up from that person? Do you really agree with that person? Does that person know?” And if you recognize where it came from, you say, “Oh my gosh, I’ve carried that around since who knows when.” Well, now’s the time to let it go. Then you go back to the breath. Ask for the question of when you’re settling down, what jhana are you in? Save that for the end of the meditation. Just try to get as settled in as you can. You’re not here to focus on the factors of jhana, you’re here to focus on the breath. The factors of jhana will take care of themselves. Because if you’re interested in the breath, try to get the breath as calm as possible, try to get the mind as calm as possible. There are only two questions. One, is the breath just right for right now? And two, how’s your mind right now? Is it hanging on to any activity that’s preventing you from settling down? The lists of factors in the jhana are useful here simply to give you an idea of what you might look for, that you might be holding on to, whether it’s directed thought or evaluation, or if it’s the rapture. Otherwise, you don’t have to think too much about those maps for the mind, because you’re here to get the mind focused on the breath. Following the breath, that gets you into deeper and deeper concentration. If you keep running back and forth, thinking about the breath and then running back to what you remember from the books, the mind isn’t still. The mind isn’t settled in. There will come times when you’ve been settled in for a long time and the question comes, “Well, what’s next?” Usually the answer is, “This is what’s next. Just stay there.” It gets so that you’re really settled in, really good at maintaining that. Because there’s a lot to be learned from maintaining a state of concentration. You see the other movements of the mind that would brush up against it and knock it over. Sometimes the question comes up, “Are you ready to go on to the next stage?” In your mind, can you detect any movement of the mind that’s obviously stressful, or any ups and downs in the level of stress? You look for a while. And if you don’t see anything, you say, “Well, this is not the time yet.” Go back into concentration. Again, there’s a movement back and forth between testing a question. If it seems helpful, stick with it. If it doesn’t seem helpful, drop it and go back. And if you’re afraid you’re not going to get into deeper states of concentration fast enough, remember, we’re not here in a speed race. As I said just now, the ability to maintain a state of concentration for a long period of time is a really important skill for developing insight, for developing discernment. Because you get hands-on experience with dealing with the fabrications of the mind and keeping it at one level in lots of different situations, while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, while you’re moving around, dealing with other people. If you maintain that perception that’s holding you centered, you’ll see a lot of the movements of the mind you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. That’s one of the ways in which discernment arises. For the question of when thinking is useful and when it’s not, it requires that you observe. What’s the thinking doing right now? What’s it accomplishing? If it’s helping you to settle down, fine. If it’s helping you to detect levels of stress that you can let go of, fine. Otherwise, drop the thinking and just go back to the breath. That way you get a sense of the right time to use the medicine and the right time to put it back in the cabinet. It’s this sense of time and place that’s one of the hardest things to teach in the meditation, one of the hardest things to develop. But it’s also one of the most important. (chimes)

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